True and False Hopes for Evanston

If Out of the Illusions and False Hopes, the Profound Despair in Which the World Today Lives, We May Discover Our One Sure Hope, Then We May Recover Our Integrity as Men of Faith

BY JAMES H. NICHOLS
Associate Professor of Modern Church History, Federated Theological Faculty, The University of Chicago

THE WHOLE ecumenical movement in the churches can be described in terms of an exercise in group therapy. It is a process of conversation in which each of us subjects himself to searching analysis on the part of others, within the context of a common loyalty. The last is expressed, at least at the great assemblies, in the common worship. The hope is that thereby each of us may learn better to distinguish those aspects of his thought, attitudes, and practices which are sociologically and culturally provincial and relative, from the God and the Church which we have all encountered only in and through our provincial and partial ideas and denominations. The hope is further, in addition to increased self-knowledge, that our devotion may be clarified and intensified. Such an understanding of the meaning of Evanston may be illustrated in relation, first, to political and social ethics, and secondly, to our diverse doctrines and church practices.

1. Political and Social Ethics

The relations of the Christian and the churches to public issues are the questions most likely to awake immediate and general attention at Evanston. It was so at Amsterdam. All that many people ever heard of Amsterdam was the interchange between Dulles and Hromadka and the pronouncement on capitalism and communism in relation to Christianity. That report declared that “the Christian churches should reject the ideologies of both communism and laissez-faire capitalism.” As John C. Bennett expressed it at the time, “No statement on this subject that really represented the Assembly . . . would be fully welcome in America.” If anything, this isolation of Americans as the defenders of a social outlook most Christians outside America consider obsolete will be heightened at Evanston.
If our guests are at all frank in their expressions about American foreign policy, tariffs, racism, and capitalism in general, millions of Americans who are more sensible and judicious than McIntire, McCormick, McCarran, McCarthy, and McArthur are going to be upset and uncomfortable. The median of Christian political opinion outside America is somewhere west of our New Deal in the area often described as "creeping socialism."

It will be apparent, on a moment's reflection, that the World Council cannot possibly commit itself to either of the great power blocs whose tension defines the present international situation. There will be those who will urge on the World Council the position of Dulles, which seems to be essentially the editorial line of "Time" and "Life" that America represents the acknowledgement of moral law and the dignity of the individual against a communist tyranny which denies both. But it is virtually certain that the majority of non-Roman Christians outside the United States simply do not believe that this is a fair or true account of the distinctions from a moral viewpoint. And Americans will have to be very careful as to how they push it, if they do. If the Americans throw their financial weight around, the Europeans and Asians will probably listen in cold disgust and go home saying that the World Council is dead, corrupted by American money.

The question which arises at once as we confront this prospect is "Can we Americans take it"? Will Carl McIntire get the American Legion to get Senators McCarran and McCarthy to hold up Iron Curtain delegations at Ellis Island? Even supposing nothing of this sort happens, there is still a question. If it is only to be a matter of diplomatic correctness, of a temporary am

One of the major changes of the last few years has been to make international politics a governing concern in the internal affairs of almost all states in unprecedented degree. And events outside the European and American sphere have made us all newly aware of the provincial character of much of our political thinking. Specifically with regard to the matter at hand, they have posed forcefully the question whether the Amsterdam formula of a "responsible society" is not simply a Western liberal criterion that can claim little Christian response from other cultural areas.

More than one of the Evanston sections will find it necessary to treat its problems under the classifications of what Adlai Stevenson has called the "three worlds." The problems of Christians in the communist world, now augmented by the Communist conquest of China, once "the greatest Christian mission field," must be considered in terms very different from those of Christians in sight of a "responsible society." Similarly, the viewpoint of the "uncommitted world," the "undeveloped" or formerly colonial areas of Asia, Africa, and parts of Latin America, is quite distinct from that of the "free world." And even within the last, the political outlook and problems of Western Europe are so different from those of the United States that one wonders whether it would not be better to talk of "four worlds." And in each of these "worlds" the internal situation is to a high degree defined by its pecu